

From medicine to munchies: the Canadian cannabis consumer in the era of legalisation

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Introduction:

In 2001, Canada became one of only two countries to legalise cannabis for medical use. In 2018, again in the company of only one other country, Canada passed federal legislation legalising the recreational use of cannabis oils and plant materials, such as flowers and seeds.

With the decades-long multinational prohibition on cannabis, there remains a dearth of all types of cannabis research into consumer behaviour and cannabis-adjacent categories and products.

This research provides a foundational reading of cannabis consumers to be built-out in the future, and give food and beverage producers insight into the cannabis and cannabis-adjacent product preferences, needs, and wants including “the munchies” of this significant (>15% of population) and rapidly-growing consumer group.

Methods:

To explore consumers’ usage of cannabis, a questionnaire comprising 24 questions, was administrated to a sample of 11,624 adult consumers, living in Southern Ontario. N=3,696 completed the survey and n= 1181 consumers self identified as users of cannabis (32%).

In addition to direct questions on cannabis, respondents were also invited to share the effect(s) of cannabis on their physical state and whether they experience increased appetite and/or cravings for specific foods/beverages, colloquially referred to as “the munchies”.

Results & Discussion:

1. Profile of users

Among major population groups, Millennials claimed the most frequent usage of cannabis, followed by Generation X (Fig 1). Based on usage frequency, there are slightly more light and medium users than heavy users (Fig 2), with men heavily outnumbering women in the heavy usage category (Fig 3).

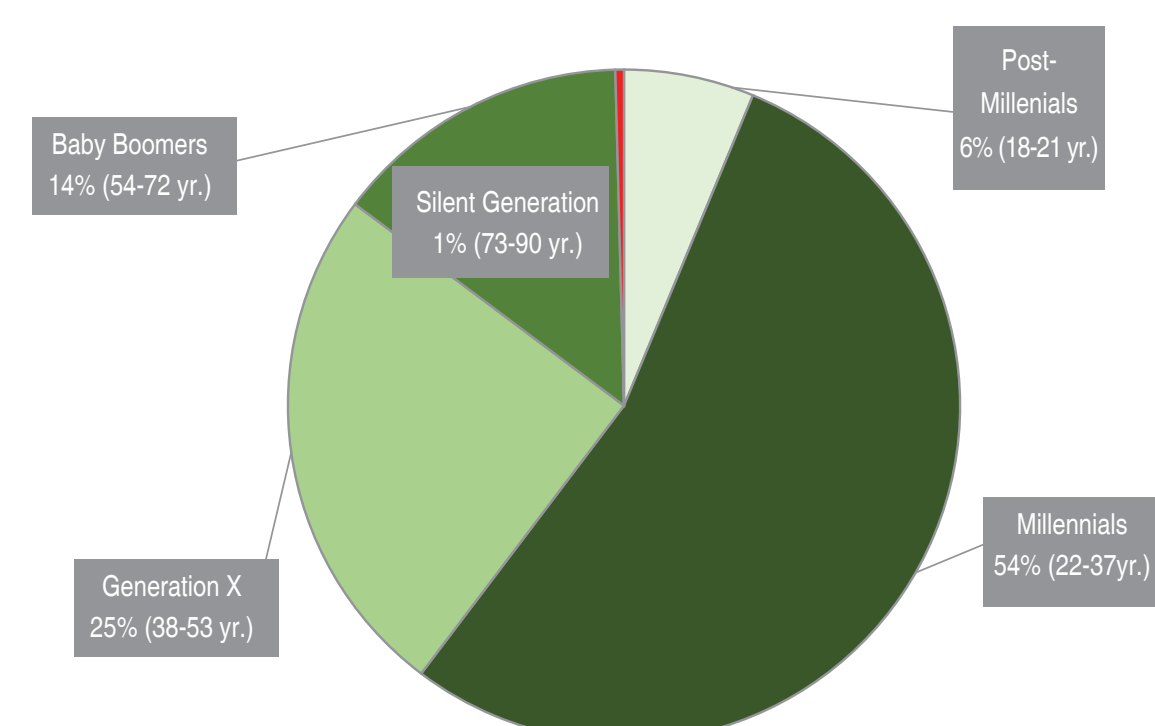


Fig 1. Cannabis users of any form by age.

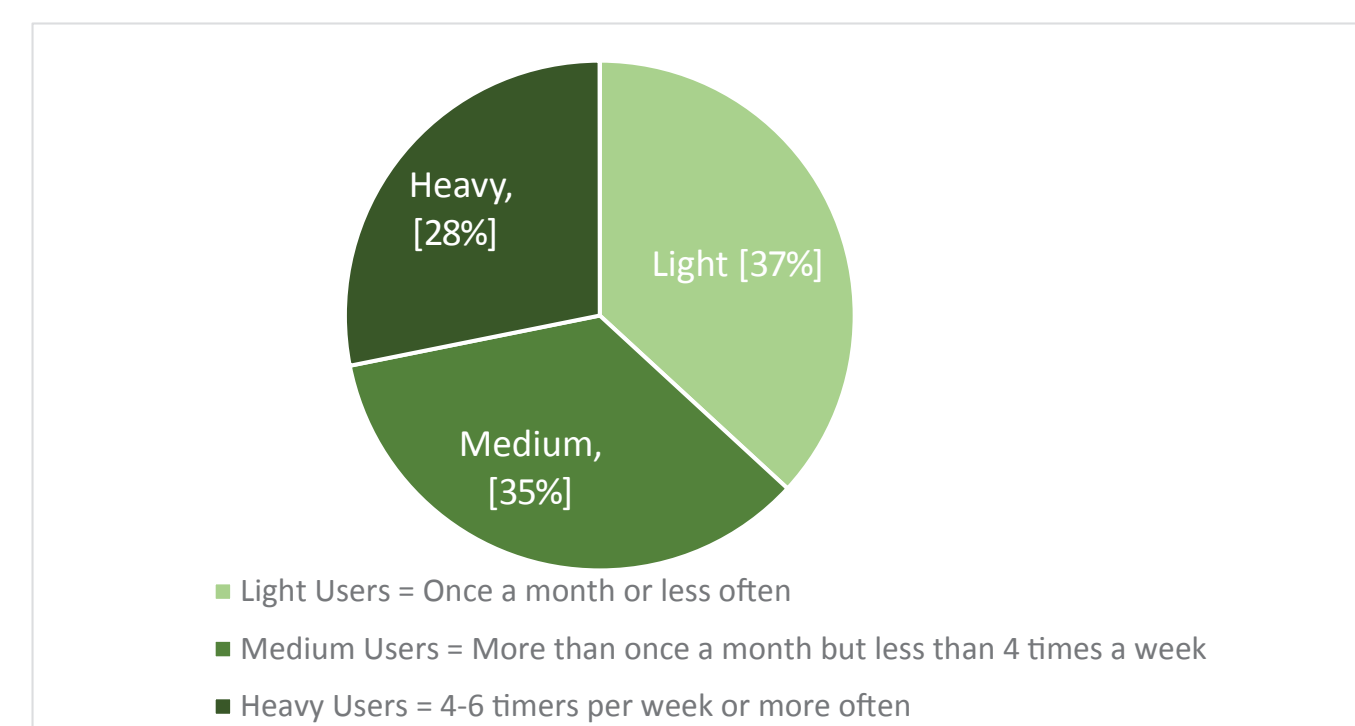


Fig 2. Cannabis users of any form by usage frequency

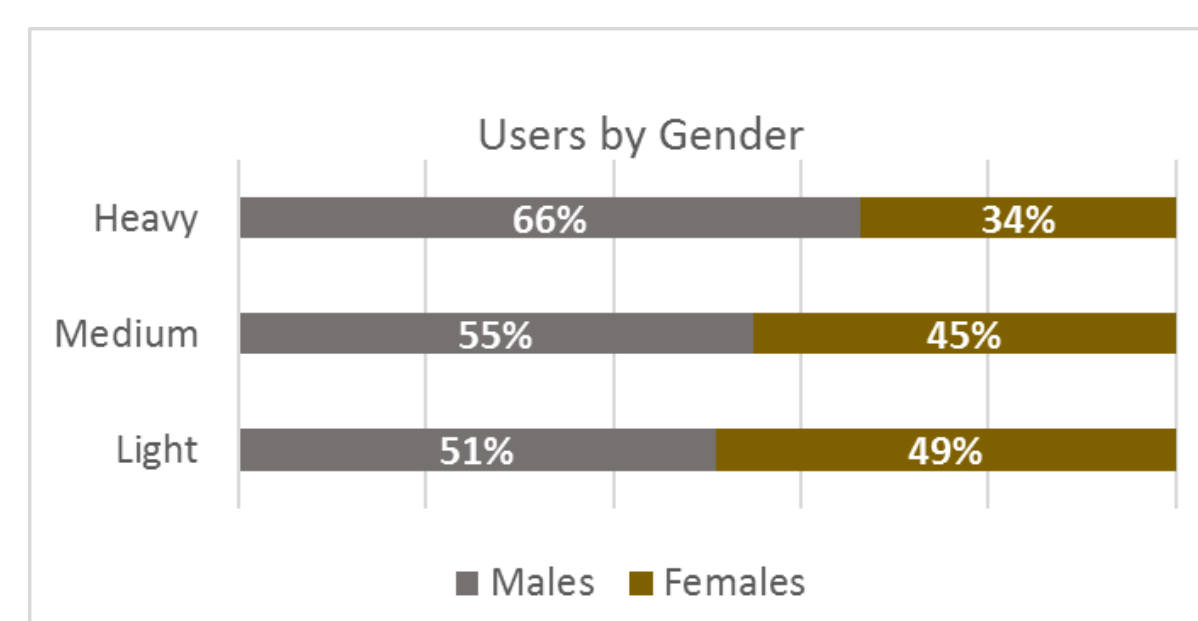


Fig 3. Cannabis users of any form by gender

2. Primary reasons to use cannabis

Overall, the most frequently mentioned reason to use cannabis was recreation, but the reasons varied across ages and usage frequency. The recreational use of cannabis seemed more frequent among younger and light users (Fig 4 & 5), whereas the older and heavy users had a tendency to to use it more for medical reasons (treatment/therapy).

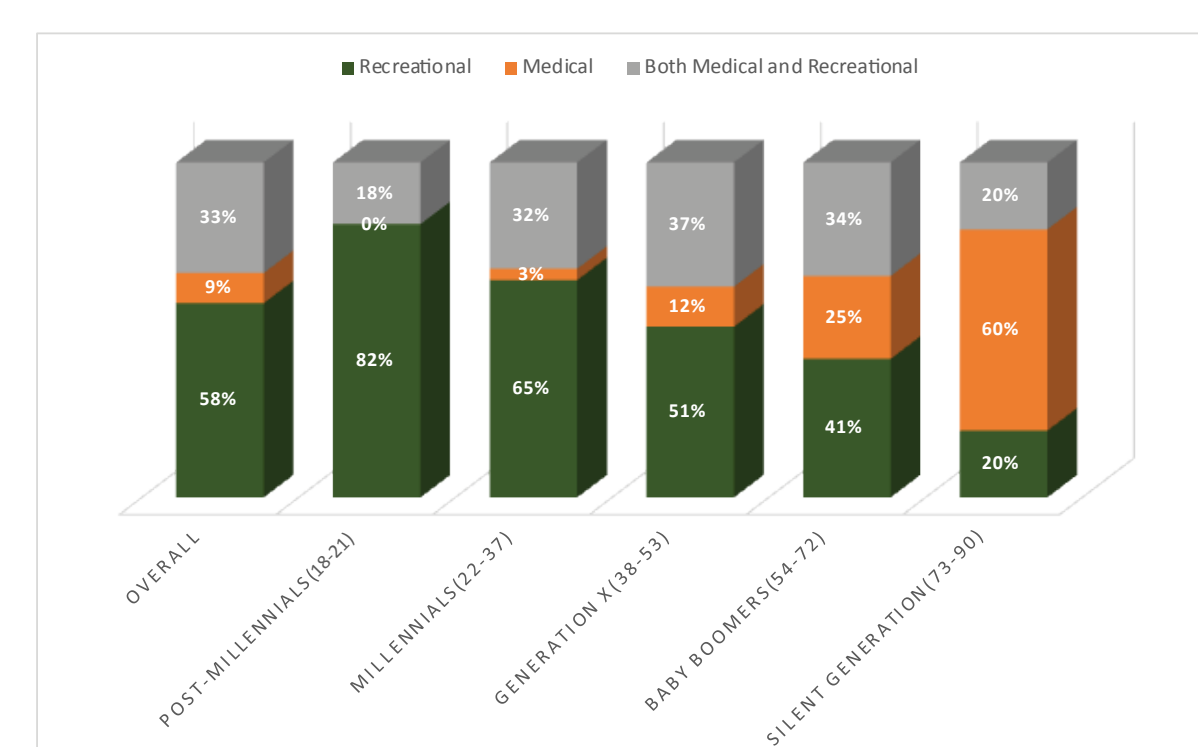


Fig 4. Motivations to use cannabis among users by generation

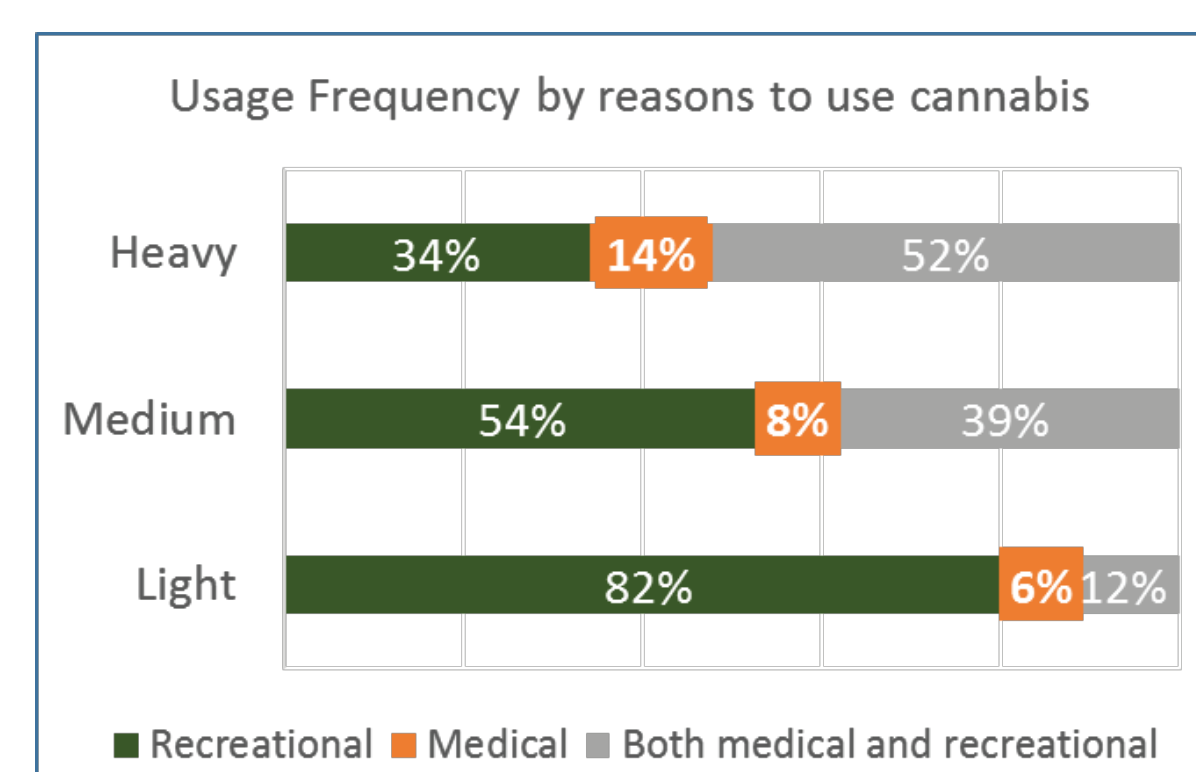


Fig 5. Motivations to use cannabis among users by usage frequency

3. Cannabis induced craving for foods – “the munchies”

One of the effects of cannabis use is an increased food intake. Over 80% users reported a strong craving for food and beverages, the phenomenon known popularly as “the munchies”. The craving seemed to increase with usage frequency (Fig 6).

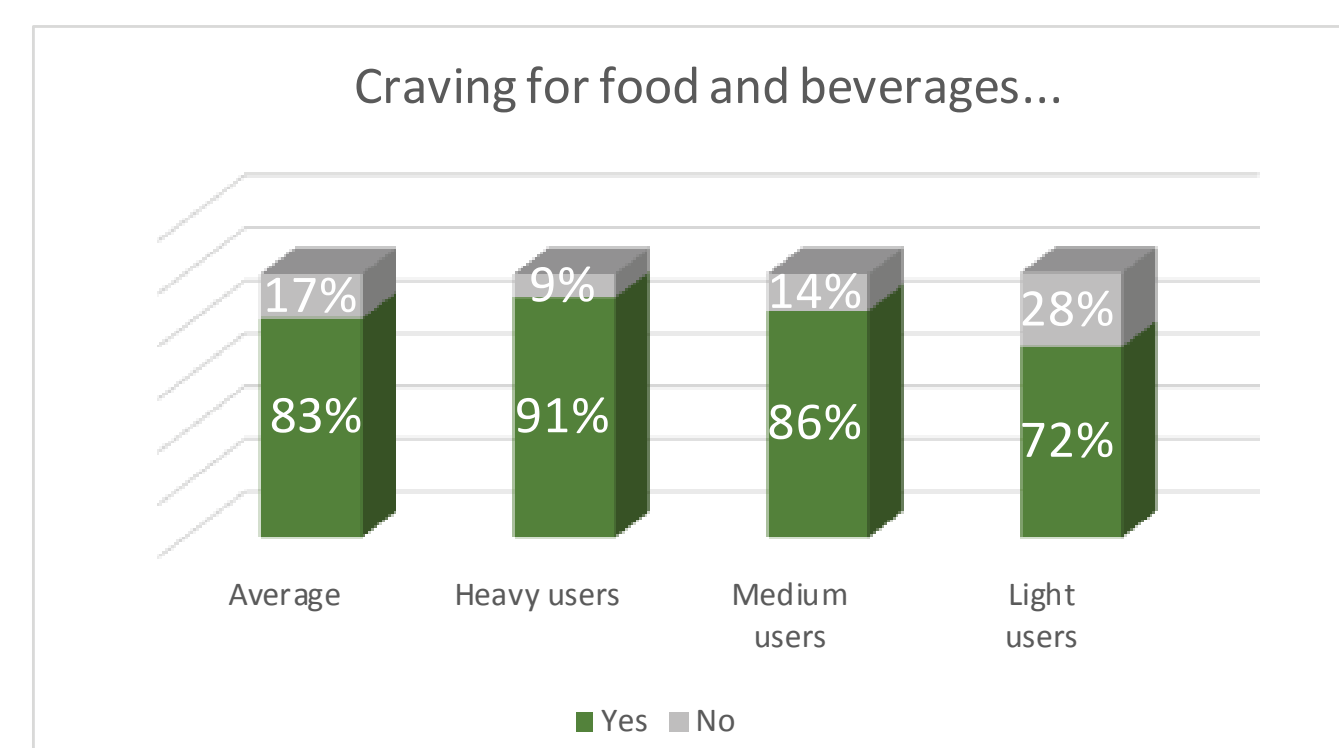


Fig 6. Cravings for foods and beverages among users

Not all tastes were equally craved. Salt and sweet were the most craved tastes, whereas sour and bitter were mentioned significantly less often for craving (Fig. 7). Crunchy was the most craved texture.

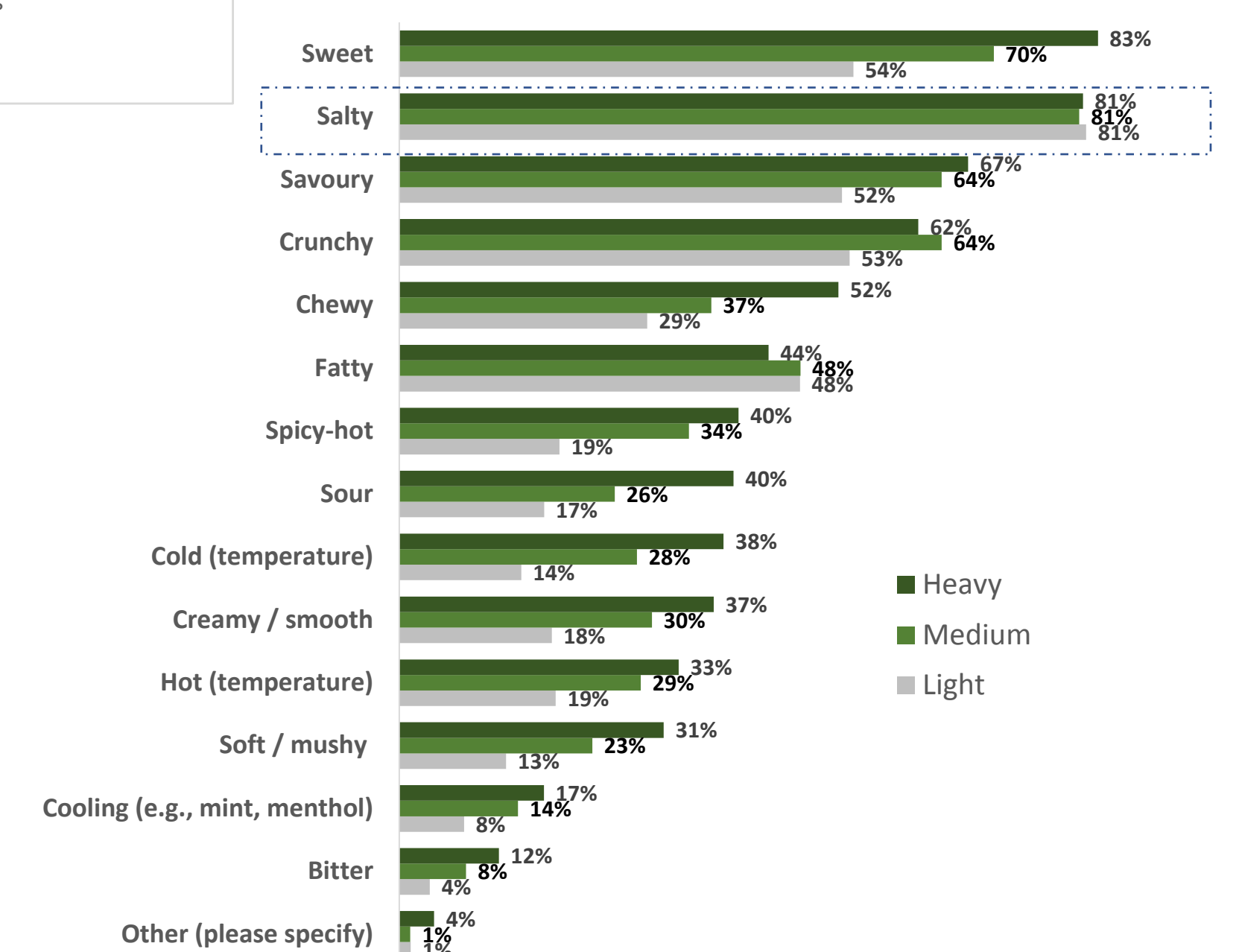


Fig 7. Cravings for specific tastes and textures

Craving has an important impact on consumption of other food products. Not surprisingly, salty snacks, sweet treats and baked products recorded the highest frequencies for products consumed following any kind of cannabis use (Fig 8)

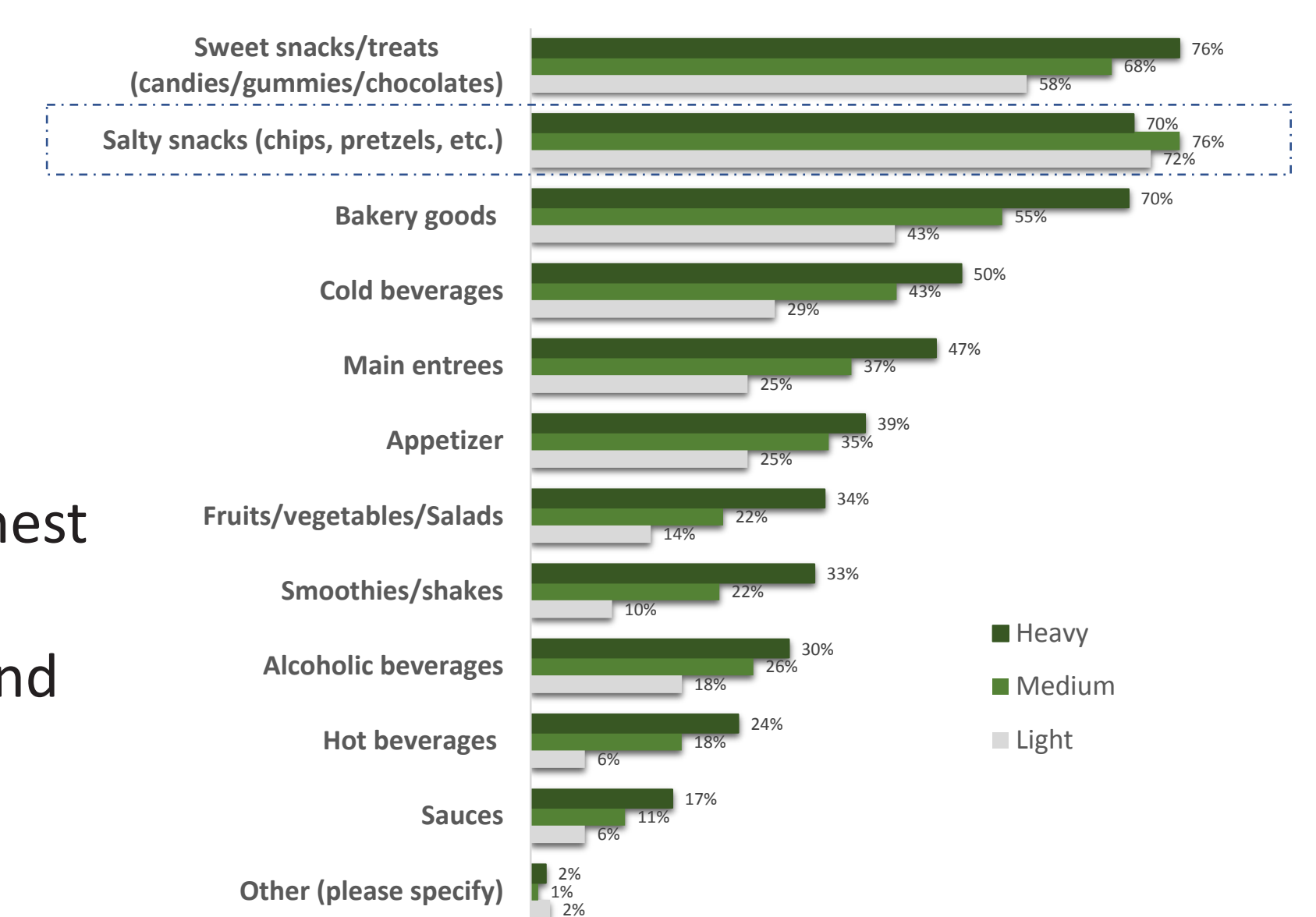


Fig 8. Cravings for specific products after cannabis use

Under the current regulations, the sale of cannabis edibles in Canada is currently illegal. Consumption of cannabis infused home-made edibles for categories like sweet snacks and baked products was claimed by close to 80% of users, prior to the permitted legal sale in October, 2019 (Fig. 9).

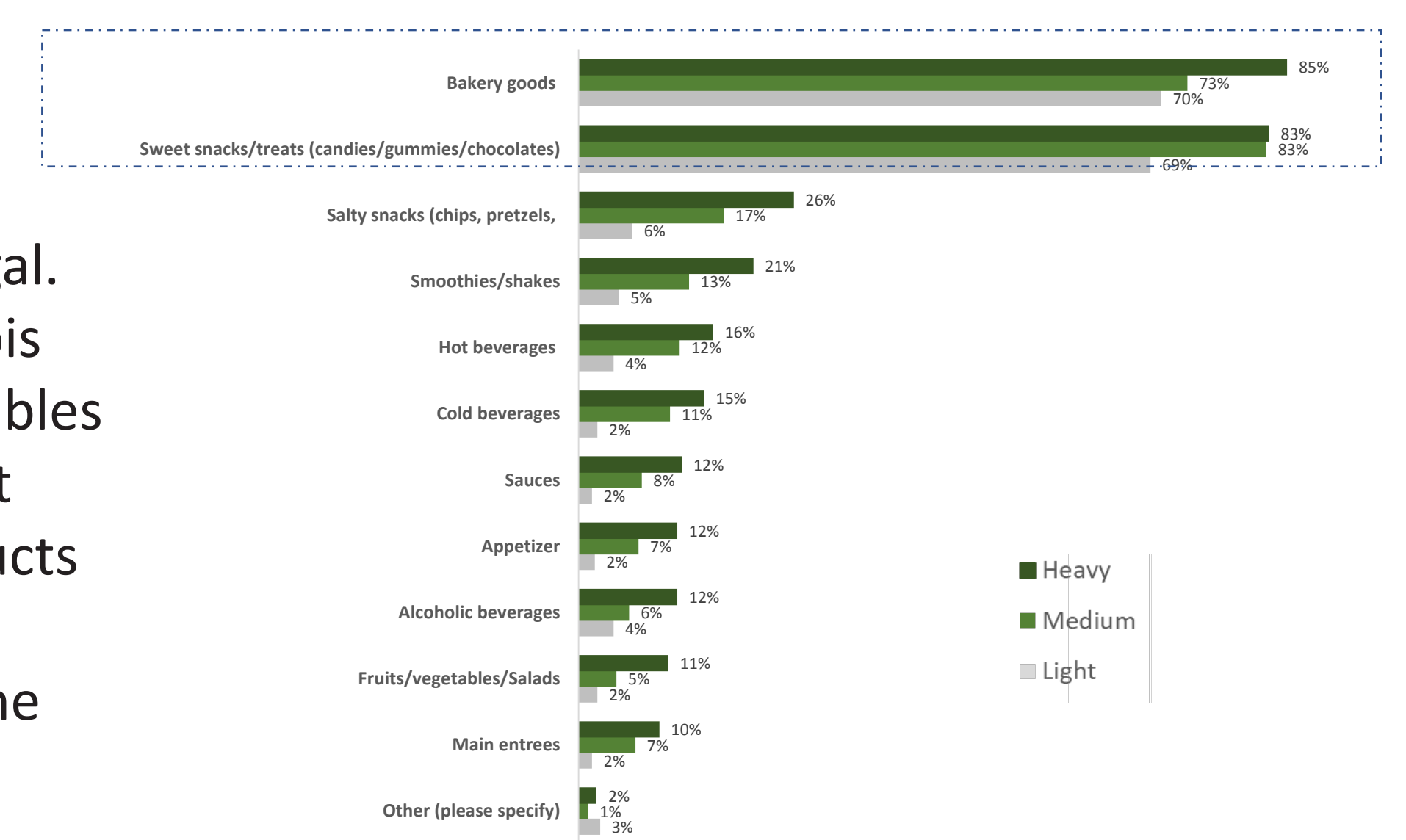


Fig 9. Cannabis infused food products used by consumers prior to legalization

Conclusions

Legalization of cannabis has revealed emerging opportunities for both food and beverage manufacturers. Continued research will be needed to better understand what types of edible products consumers will want to eat in the future. Knowing that differences exist among different demographic and cannabis user groups, manufacturers will need to consider the needs of these groups when developing products.